
In April 1975, as South Vietnam fell, three thousand orphans were airlifted out in Operation Babylift, a joint effort of the U.S. government and private orphanages. Years of warfare had resulted in mass orphaning and a pariah class of con lai, the mixed race children of American GIs and Vietnamese women. In the turmoil, their fates were uncertain. The controversial operation placed them with adoptive families in the U.S. Displaced from their families and nation and raised by strangers in a new country, many adoptees feel torn between different worlds. Many struggle with their national, cultural, racial, and personal identities. Large gaps mark their life histories. Family, parents, even birth dates and names are often unknown. These are lives ruptured by the fall of one nation and the unchosen flight to another, trajectories rent by U.S. expansion and warfare in Southeast Asia and left in an uncertain place in America.

Such displacements that disrupt the temporality of a life and bring into conjunction vastly different lives and places trouble the idea of narrative as a mode of making meaning. How does one tell these kinds of stories that are only becoming more common in our time? For Vietnamese American author Aimee Phan, tracing the impacts of Operation Babylift in We Should Never Meet (2004) means adapting the story cycle, an overlooked genre of interconnected short stories. She is not alone. From acclaimed writers like Junot Díaz and Jhumpa Lahiri to emerging voices like Phan’s, Asian American and Latina/o immigrant authors are embracing this form and bringing it into contemporary American literature’s mainstream. My dissertation examines why the story cycle is so productive for writers in the largest groups reshaping the U.S. through immigration (De Genova 13). What does it offer for narrating experiences of displacement, diversification, and community (re)formation? Asian Americans and Latinas/os are negotiating their places within, between, and beyond ethnic communities, racial formations, and nations. For their authors, these unresolved social struggles become artistic challenges of giving coherent narrative shape to immigrant subjectivities and communities. I trace how their story cycles stretch the possibilities of narrative to meet these challenges.

I focus on 1968 onward, a period in which Asian American and Latina/o racial coalitions were forged even as conflicts abroad and changes in U.S. law brought new waves of immigration that unsettled these groups into diverse, transnational formations. These coalitions encompass greater diversity than ever before—national, geographic, ethnic, cultural, religious, gender, socioeconomic, and political. Asian American and Latina/o politics and scholarship are confronting this strain: how to continue conceptualizing collective projects without marginalizing the important differences within these collectives. In this period the story cycle’s defining tension between unity and multiplicity captures a central challenge.

Research Context

Despite their proliferation and increasing relevance, Asian American and Latina/o story cycles remain a blind spot in literary studies, subject to hierarchies and boundaries in the field. My project sheds light on this interstitial archive, showing how it reconfigures understandings of narrative, genre, and American literature. Falling between the novel and the short story, the story cycle has received little attention, and only a few studies touch on immigrant examples. Initial attempts to recuperate the genre are limited by an impulse to rigidly define the genre and its

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1 The two substantive studies that exist are Davis and Nagel. Neither study focuses on the specifics of Asian American and Latina/o story cycles in this period of immigration and transnationalism.
territory. This impulse re-isolates the genre. I take the story cycle instead as a flexible lens on formal possibilities lying at and extending across the boundaries of dominant genres like the novel and short story. This approach opens dialogue between the story cycle and broader theories of narrative, which have overlooked this genre. The interchange enriches in both directions.

My archive demands not just cross-generic but cross-racial research. In literary studies, Asian American and Latina/o literatures have remained separate, part of the balkanization of ethnic studies fields (De Genova vii). My project draws connections across these boundaries. At the same time, these literatures are frequently marginalized from broader discussions of American literature. With the story cycle, Asian Americans and Latinas/os are bringing a minor genre associated with Anglo-American regionalism into the contemporary mainstream. I take this adaptation as an opportunity to trace more nuanced and dialogic relations between minority and dominant literary traditions. As Asian Americans and Latinas/os reshape the social landscape of the U.S., their story cycles are part of transformations in the literary landscape.

Central Argument
I examine how Asian American and Latina/o writers develop the story cycle to grasp the experiences of their dynamic communities. To understand this fit, my project advances story cycle theory. Current models define the genre as a balance between unity and multiplicity (Kennedy); the stories in a cycle are independent yet interconnected in a whole greater than the sum of its parts. I theorize this form with the concept transnarrative, a structure marked by trans-relations between, across, and beyond individual narratives in a larger network. Transnarrative texts sustain a set of interrelated tensions: the particular and the general, the one and the many, connection and disconnection, the story in which we are immersed and the others on the periphery. Trans-relations call on readers to hold multiple, contradictory impulses in suspension. Story cycle dynamics invite attention to divergent scales—from the individual story to inter-narrative groupings to the whole cycle. Trans-relations interconnect stories while registering their boundaries; they join heterogeneous units into a whole while maintaining their differences.

It is the ability to sustain these tensions, my dissertation argues, that make the story cycle so generative for Asian American and Latina/o writers. Transnarrative structures provide flexible models for narrating tensions of displacement, diversification, and community formation in the communities they depict. The story cycle has traction on these tensions because they also delineate trans-relations. As increasingly transnational formations (Wong; J. Saldívar), Asian Americans and Latinas/os conjoin divergent scales (Koshy). Their crossings blur the borders between Asia and the U.S. and across the Americas while exposing the structural barriers that shape those crossings (Palumbo-Liu; R. Saldívar). Demographic shifts are leading these racially-based political projects to encompass emerging differences (Lowe; Flores; Torres-Saillant).

Methodology
My work joins efforts in literary studies and beyond to rethink the relations between aesthetic forms and social contexts. What must be rethought includes the temptation to read a work’s aesthetics as reflecting its context, a practice that is particularly troubling for minority literatures where race is a key context. If ethnic literary studies is to sustain engagement with issues of race but avoid propagating ideas of racially determined aesthetics, it must develop

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2 See Ingram and Kennedy for examples.
3 For example, Narrative, the journal of record in narrative studies, has published no articles on the story cycle.
4 I draw on Zhou Xiaojing’s call to see how minority literatures intervene in and transform established canons.
nuanced models of relating aesthetics and context, form and race. Such methods should grasp that literary works engage questions of race and ethnicity in ways specific to their nature as aesthetic constructions. I synthesize a methodology to navigate these demands: approaching form as an aesthetic mode for modeling and imagining social complexity. The story cycles I explore do not reflect but actively shape immigrant experiences into narrative form. Thus I take them not as illustrations of social issues or auto-ethnographic data to be interpreted by current theories but as theorizing contributions in themselves. This method credits narrative as a distinct medium through which Asian Americans and Latinas/os critique and make sense of a complex world.

Approaching the forms of minority literature as active and strategic engages a growing problem in Asian American and Latina/o studies: how to span heterogeneous populations without falling back on essentialist conceptions of race (Lye). I show that formal strategies offer focused comparative rubrics that can evade this pitfall. Two qualities of form enable this. First, form is the repeatable element of literature that crosses contexts. Second, formal challenges are often the translation into aesthetic terms of unresolved social struggles (Adorno). Thus formal patterns emerging concurrently across different contexts can mark out projects linking diverse groups within a racial category, not through an a priori identity but through shared strategies and the struggles they entail. To trace the story cycle as a strategy spanning different groups of Asian Americans and Latinas/os is to map parallel representational and sociopolitical challenges among these groups to which their uses of the story cycle are responses. Moving through textual coalitions can reveal emergent alignments not readily visible otherwise. This approach allows me to follow strategic alignments within and between racial groups. Thus I can contribute to much needed cross-racial scholarship on Asian Americans and Latinas/os.

Chapter Outline
The story cycles in my archive attempt to do justice to the fullness and complexity of the communities they depict. These ambitious projects face tough challenges from the protean nature of their subjects and the inequitable discursive contexts in which they are written. These rapidly evolving communities seem to outrun attempts at representation. At the same time, self-representations by Asian Americans and Latinas/os face pressures from the specific ways these groups are stereotyped, racialized, and rendered foreign in dominant U.S. discourses. My dissertation is organized around the tense intersections of these dual challenges. At each intersection, Asian American and Latina/o story cycles deploy transnarrative strategies to confront contradictions and open alternative modes of representation.

Chapter one addresses a discursive pressure that frames minority self-representation: entrenched racial and ethnic stereotypes. For minority writers to clear space for their own stories requires contesting not just the content of stereotypes but also their ideologically efficient modes of representation. Rishi Reddi’s *Karma* (2007) offers a powerful example of such efforts. Stereotypes flatten groups and individuals while naturalizing these distortions. I examine the tensions between competing narrative perspectives in *Karma* as techniques denaturalizing these “just so” characterizations of stereotyping. Doing so brings out previously unseen relations between character types and stereotypes. Chapter two continues interrogating the discursive pressures of stereotyping, focusing on its strategies of homogenizing racial and ethnic groups.

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5 I build on the work of scholars in Marxist criticism (Jameson), cultural studies (Levine), ethnic studies (Xiaojing; Gates), and art history (Bois).
6 I draw on Lye and Xiaojing in developing this role for form.
7 Such scholarship is still nascent. See De Genova and O’Brien for important initial studies.
Such homogenizing stands in tension with the diversification of Asian American and Latina/o communities. In *Karma* and Junot Díaz’s *Drown* (1996), I identify a distinct story cycle technique that speaks to this tension: transpositions in which a minor character in one story recurs as a major character in a separate story. Transpositions unsettle narrative organizations of major/minor, center/periphery. We can understand these as structuring narratives to recognize the stratifications and marginal subjects diversifying Asian American and Latina/o communities.

While racialization and stereotyping often subsume individual differences within a homogeneous category, the obverse operation is equally powerful. Chapter three looks at emblematizing, in which an ethnic minority individual stands in for a diverse group. This representational logic is particularly charged in narrating how immigrant subjects fit into the U.S. Prevailing ideologies of assimilation and individual mobility place discursive pressures on Asian American and Latina/o *bildungsromane*. Intriguingly, many story cycles bring transnarrative multiplicity to this genre of individual development. I read Tomás Rivera’s *…y no se lo tragó la tierra* (1971), Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* (1976), and Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street* (1984) as story cycles staging tensions between the protagonist’s diachronic development and synchronic dilations toward other characters in the ethnic community whose stories cannot progress. The question of those left behind troubles the American immigrant *bildungsroman* of individual mobility. This tension exposes the contradictions between the narrative of individual opportunity and the structural barriers that frame Asians and Latinas/os as collective incursions on the U.S. social fabric. The positioning of Asian Americans and Latinas/os against the horizon of the nation-state is in tension with their growing transnationalism. At the same time the individualist paradigm which can atomize consequences and responsibilities conflicts with the embedding of these subjects in increasingly diffuse communities of fate (Williams), networks of effects linking people and places. My fourth chapter shows how Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) and Phan’s *We Should Never Meet* deploy the story cycle to map, respectively, the Bengali diaspora and the many parties touched by Operation Babylift. Encoding vast distances and differences in the gaps between stories and leaving them for readers to structure, these texts situate us within the continuities and discontinuities, causal relations and detachments that contour global displacements.

Working within the CCSRE Community

CCSRE’s comparative and interdisciplinary breadth would provide a rich environment for my work. My research draws connections between racial groups on whom comparative scholarship is still developing. Comparisons must be made carefully, noting the differences between and within these groups as well as their commonalities. Dialoging with scholars whose research bridges diverse racial and ethnic groups would lead my comparative work to be that much sharper. Exploring intersections between narrative forms and social tensions, my work crosses from literary studies to other fields. In examining the operations of stereotyping, I synthesize research in social psychology with narrative theory on characterization. Issues of immigration and diversification necessitate dialogue with sociology, political history, law, and economics. The positions of Asian Americans and Latinas/os within and beyond the U.S. nation-state draw my research into the fields of American studies and globalization studies. Given these interdisciplinary issues, I would be eager to have my thinking stretched by the perspectives of scholars in other fields who are equally passionate about issues of race and ethnicity. In turn I would reciprocate from my perspective in literary studies, showing how minority literatures offer distinct ways of thinking, knowing, and feeling the challenges of the present.
References


Timetable for Completion of Degree

Work already done on dissertation (as of Jan. 2013)

- Chapter 1 (45 pages) drafted and approved
- Introduction (35 pages) drafted*
- Chapter 2 (50 pages) drafted*
  * Half of the committee has had a chance to look over and approve the introduction chapter and chapter 2. As I lay out in the timeline to follow, I will complete these committee reviews in the next month or two.

Recent Milestones (to give a sense of current pace of dissertation progress)

May – Aug. 2013: Researched and drafted Introduction Chapter (35 pages)

Sept. – Dec. 2013: Researched and drafted Chapter 2 (50 pages)

Projected Timeline Going Forward:

Jan. – Mar. 2014: Research and draft Chapter 4 (50 pages)
  Complete committee reviews of Introduction and Chapter 2

Apr. – May 2014: Revise and edit Chapter 1
  Committee reviews of Chapter 4


Aug. – Nov. 2014: Research and draft Chapter 3 (45 pages)

Dec. 2014: Draft Conclusion (15 pages)
  Committee reviews of Chapter 3

Jan. – Feb. 2015: Revise and edit Chapter 3
  Committee reviews of Conclusion

Mar. 2015: Revise Conclusion

Mar. - May 2015: Final edits, closing colloquium, committee signatures, and submission